

Education Programme under Attack

Krishna Kumar

Early last month two ongoing programmes of Eklavya, a voluntary institution which has pioneered innovative ideas in education and has been working within the state education system in Madhya Pradesh earned the displeasure of the BJP state government and were ordered to be closed down. This is an indicator of the limits of non-political efforts to withstand the feudal-trading-middle class combine which governs the state.

EKLAVYA has been known as a voluntary institution with a distinction: it works inside the state system of education. The kind of work it has been doing has no match anywhere in the country, both in terms of style and impact. On November 7, the BJP government of Madhya Pradesh issued the order to close down two of Eklavya's important programmes, namely, Prashika (acronym for Primary Education Programme) and the social studies project which includes the preparation of innovative textbooks covering the social sciences, including history. Issued in the name of the governor, the order does not say that it will apply with retrospective effect, but that is how it will work, considering that it disrupts the programmes in mid-session. It will require children to abandon the Eklavya textbooks (published by the State Textbook Corporation) which they have been using since July and buy another set consisting of books used state-wide.

On the face of it, the government's decision to close down these programmes looks sudden. Like all other projects of Eklavya, including the publication and dissemination of a science magazine for children, these two programmes also had the state government's approval and co-operation. There was no question of financial liability as Eklavya runs itself with central government assistance, mainly from the department of science and technology (DST). The MP government, it appears from available evidence, has made up its mind to uproot Eklavya. The order of November 7 cites as rationale for closure the evaluation done by a committee whose report has been kept confidential. Earlier, a committee had been appointed to evaluate the older and more widely known activity of Eklavya, namely the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP). Informally the minister of education Vikram Verma had this summer articulated his desire that Eklavya members should start packing up. Representatives of Eklavya tried to negotiate

with senior BJP leaders in Delhi, including Atal Behari Vajpayee, obviously to no avail. That the government should first hit at Eklavya's social studies programme makes sense, in view of the analytical and socio-political orientation given to the study of the past in the history portion of the Eklavya texts. Indeed, these textbooks are superior to the reputed, so-called 'leftist' history series of the NCERT, mainly because they reflect an understanding of children and teacher-child interaction in real, ordinary classrooms. Like all other Eklavya materials, they have been produced after intensive interaction with teachers, and in this sense they carry forward the community campaign Eklavya's science programme symbolises in several mofussil areas of south-western MR. The closure of the modest and newer primary education programme is obviously an attempt to camouflage the BJP's wrath against the history pedagogy embedded in Eklavya's texts. Some time back, a special issue of *Hoshangabad Vigyan*, a magazine for teachers, on the Ayodhya controversy had earned enough wrath of the RSS and the Bajrang Dai to deserve public burning of its copies.

The image of Eklavya as a leftist organisation is neither new nor false, although every attempt has been made, especially in the recent past to disown this image and to keep Eklavya's public discourse purely academic. The tension surrounding Eklavya and inside it (active, paid employees are over 40) over this matter is an instructive example of left-liberal

social elements bending over backwards in many parts of the country to accommodate quasi-fascist views of education. The bending and the attempts to stay uninvolved in events demanding public response have, in a way, hastened the attack on Eklavya. The next round of attack will inevitably be on the HSTP which involves hundreds of government school teachers and thousands of children in several districts. Indications are that the government might co-opt the HSTP rather than close it down.

It merits attention that the dramatic order on Eklavya coincided with the physical attack by BJP activists on Brahma Dev Sharma, a highly respected IAS officer and educationist who took voluntary retirement to devote himself to the cause of tribal people, especially in the Bastar area which is where he was assaulted. Sharma was the director of public instruction in MP when the HSTP, in its embryonic form, was initially permitted to be launched in government schools in 1969. The sanction given by him enabled Anil Sadgopal to undertake this project in rural schools in the neighbourhood of Ktshore Bharati. Eklavya is an offshoot of KB which officially closed down about a year ago. KB's campus near Paliya Pipariya village is now used by an RSS-trusi to organise training and discussion programmes. Legal struggle against the MP government's award of this campus has been, in the meanwhile, initiated by Hargovind who filed a petition in the Supreme Court on November 25. Backing him is a small organisation of landless labourers which KB had assisted to form in a critical phase of its tangled final phase.

Whatever the eventual outcome of the KB-Eklavya story turns out to be, it already illustrates the limits of non-political efforts to withstand the feudal-trading-middle class combine which governs MP. It also shows the futility of attempts to separate educational issues from political and ideological choices in the putative interest of survival spaces. The idea that the deeper issues of social transformation need to be attended to in an open, unmasked discourse continues to lose ground and supporters.

Available Review of Women Studies

The Review of Women Studies appears twice yearly as a supplement to the last issues of April and October. The April 25, 1992 issue was a collection of well-researched, original articles focusing on Women: Rights and Law. Earlier collections have focused on Women and Their Bodies (April 1990), Ideology of Motherhood (October 1990), Institutions, Beliefs, Ideologies: Widows, Education and Social Change (April 1991) and Women and the Media (October 1991).

For copies please write to: Circulation Manager, Economic and Political Weekly, Hitkari House, 284, Shahid Bhagatsingh Road, Bombay 400 038.